

Enclosure of letter from William Steil Pettegrew to Alexander Graham Bell, May 27, 1911

THE STORY OF THE FIRST PRACTICAL USE MADE OF THE BELL TELEPHONE. By William Steil Pettegrew.

In the early summer of the year 1877 the writer was a passenger bound for the City of Ottawa on one of the steamboats navigating the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers between Montreal and the Capital of the Dominion of Canada. A fellow-passenger, a well-built venerable-looking gentleman apparently about sixty years of age, with a full and abundant dark beard and whiskers slightly tinged grey, sat down beside the writer and engaged him in conversation. The dialogue did not proceed far before the stranger suddenly remarked, "You're a Scotchman." Acknowledging the truth of the assertion, the rejoinder included the observation that he fancied his interlocutor was an Englishman. Gazing for a moment with an amused expression the gentleman replied in a broad English Edinburgh accent, "No, I'm a Scotchman like yersel". He explained modestly that he was a teacher of elocution, and that his profession required that he speak with an English accent. He further stated that his mission to Ottawa was in the interests of his son, Alexander Graham Bell, who had invented the telephone. The writer had been to the Centennial exhibition the year before, and although he had heard of the telephone, had not seen it, and had an imperfect notion of its purpose. Professor Alexander Melville Bell, for it was he himself, the famous elocutionist, educator and scientific author of the Voice — Visible Speech — hereupon described the Telephone, and inquired whether the writer could recommend some suitable person in Ottawa to look after his son's interests at the Capital, and more especially watch against infringements being registered in the Patent Office. The writer was then in the employ of the Dominion Government, being in charge of the law branch of the Department of Marine and Fisheries. That Department adjoined the Department of Agriculture wherein is the patent office. Learning this, the professor requested the writer

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to act in the premises himself. This was assented to. Upon arrival in Ottawa, Professor Melville Bell was introduced to some of the higher officials, and also to the newspaper offices. It appears from information given by the professor at that time that the telephone was chiefly invented by his son in Edinburgh some years previously, and that the close concentrated attention the younger Bell had devoted to his invention, brought on illness. This illness was the chief contributing cause of the familyemigrating to Canada, where they settled at Tutelo Heights, three miles from Brantford Ontario. There was laid the first experimental telephone line of 10th August 1876 between the City of Brantford and the Tutelo Heights residence. About the 1st of April, 1877, another experimental line, this line between Boston and Somerville, Mass., was laid by a Mr. Charles Williams jr., of Boston, an electrician, between his office and dwelling house.

At the time of Professor Melvill Bell's visit to Ottawa no legislation existed to enable telephone lines to be laid, and the Western Union Telegraph Company stubbornly refused to accomodate the new invention. Overtures made to the Government induced them to lay a line between the official residence residence at Rideau Hall of the Earl of Dufferin, Governor General of Canada, and the office of the Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, the Prime Minister, two miles distant. That was the first telephone line of a permanent character., and the first line to contribute a revenue to the Bell Telephone Company. The annual rent of the instruments on that line paid by the Canadian Government at first was \$42.50, as will be seen from the accompanying photozincograph impression of the lease to the Dominion Government. For the summer a temporary line was [laid at Bothwick Springs a few miles from Ottawa, and in the Autumn of 1877 the Ontario Agricultur] laid at Bothwick Springs a few miles from Ottawa, and in the Autumn of 1877 the Ontario Agricultural Exhibition was held in the outskirts of Ottawa. The commissioners kindly gave the fourth page of their four-page programme on which to describe the new invention, and free permission to erect a suitable line on the exhibition ground& The exhibit, however, attracted little attention, being looked upon much in the light of a child's toy. And an imperfect toy at that. That imperfection showed itself in the instrument, sometimes stopping in the midst of a

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conversation. This was the cause of the Prime Minister sending for the writer and telling him either to put the instrument in proper working order, or to take it out altogether. The writer promised to communicate with Professor Bell to provide a remedy. The Professor replied that he was unable to provide one, but a hope was expressed that the writer would do his best endeavor to prevent such a drastic step being taken as Mr. Mackenzie threatened.

Just at this period occurred the most trying time in the history of the Telephone, and the most disheartening rebuffs experienced by the inventor, Professor Alexander Graham Bell. In the many efforts he made to float his Company through Mr. Gardiner Hubbard, afterwards his father-in-law, the inventor applied to Mr. Chauncey Depew, for \$10,000. offering him therefore a sixth interest in his Company. Mr. Depew took a week to consider this matter and then declined. At a dinner given to Senator Depew two years ago, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of his birthday, the Senator narrated the incident, stating that he was predisposed to accept Mr. Bell's offer, he had unfortunately for himself during that memorable weeks time consulted the then President of the Western Union Telegraph Company, who dissuaded him by urging that the device was paltry and impracticable. At the banquet the Senator informed his entertainers that a calculation he had made would have yielded him a return of more than One Hundred Million Dollars. The Senator, however, philosophically consoled himself by remarking that perhaps it was as well he did not accept, as such a vast fortune might have caused him to die of high living, and he would thus have been deprived of the inestimable opportunity to enjoy the then hospitality of his friends.

Few inventors possess the invaluable qualities of Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. Most inventors, are inventors, and nothing else. But with Dr. Bell it was far different. He would deliver lectures, and he would write entertaining articles for the magazines and newspapers. He devised methods detailing means by which his invention could be laid through cities and put into offices, residences and manufacturies. His courage never seemed to desert him. Not even when, after the Depew episode he applied in a long

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letter to Senator Don. Cameron offering him half interest in his company, simply for the Senator's influence, he learned that the Senator's secretary had been ordered to throw out the man with the fool-talking machine should he venture to call.

In that distressing condition of affairs had the Prime Minister's order gone into effect, and the announcement accordingly been made throughout Canada, the United States, and the World at large that the Canadian Government had abandoned the Telephone, such announcement would have been sufficient to toll its death-knell. And it would have proably been buried so deep and become a fading memory as to require a hundred, perhaps two hundred or more years to resurrect it. And the strong probabilities are that the attention of subsequent inventors would not have been directed to that greater wonder of the twentieth century, the Wireless Telephone either. But Providence had otherwise decreed. It was before noted that conversation was apt to be interrupted. Music, however, was never. Singing and playing received no interruption. Lady Dufferin, now the Dowager Marchioness, would sing and play the piano at Rideau Hall, and the music was heard distinctly in Ottawa, two miles distant. A confrere in the Marine Department, Captain afterwards Colonel Ganvideau, and subsequently 3 Deputy Minister, was, on account of his being an excellent singer, sought to sing at the Ottawa end, while Lord and Lady Dufferin listened at the Rideau Hall end. When it became known by those distinguished personages that the telephone might be discontinued, Lord Dufferin promptly countermanded the order, and thus saved to the world at large the greatest invention of the nineteenth century. The next year, 1878, the Blake transmitter was invented and this supplied the defect before felt in conversation being interrupted. Other improvements from time to time rapidly followed to perfect telephony as we now have it.